3.3.7 Southern Forest Group

Information in Section 3.3.7 is taken from the WDNR Handbook "Ecological Landscapes of Wisconsin", and "Wisconsin's Biodiversity as a Management Issue" (Addis et al. 1995).

Wisconsin's southern forest communities occur south and west of the climatic Tension Zone - the approximate area where vegetative communities change from the prairie, savanna, oak, and mixed hardwood forests of the south to the mixed deciduous-coniferous forests of the north (Figure 2-2). The landscape in northern Wisconsin was largely forested prior to Euro-American settlement, but the southern forests were interspersed with extensive prairie and savanna communities.

Although a number of species range across both the northern and southern forests, there are floristic elements specific to each region (e.g., boreal elements in the north and prairie elements in the south). Also, species abundance may differ, and they may occur in different assemblages. Historically, southern Wisconsin's communities included, in order of relative abundance, broad-leaved deciduous forest, oak savanna, conifer forest, prairie, and open wetlands.

Southern Wisconsin's landscapes have changed greatly during the past 150 years. The loss of forest has been widespread in areas suitable for agriculture and residential development. Another major change occurred as the open landscapes of prairie and savanna succeeded to closed canopy forest following the exclusion of periodic fires. In many areas, canopy composition is now shifting from oak dominance to shade-tolerant mesic hardwoods, primarily due to the absence of fire disturbances. Land use and ownership patterns have resulted in significant forest fragmentation throughout southern Wisconsin, highlighting the ecological significance of the few remaining large forested blocks, particularly those along major river corridors.

Data from the Forest Inventory and Analysis Program (FIA) indicate that as of 1996 there were approximately 4.8 million acres, or 31%, of southern Wisconsin classified as timberland. Oak-hickory was the most common forest type group, followed by the maple-basswood group, lowland hardwoods, pines, aspen-birch, and lowland conifers.

During the development of the Wisconsin Strategy for Wildlife Species of Greatest Conservation Need, the Southern Forest Group included the following ten community types:

- Central Sands Pine - Oak Forest (Section 3.3.7.1, Page 3-663)
- Floodplain Forest (Section 3.3.7.2, Page 3-670)
- Hemlock Relict (Section 3.3.7.3, Page 3-679)
- Pine Relict (Section 3.3.7.4, Page 3-684)
- Southern Dry Forest (Section 3.3.7.5, Page 3-690)
- Southern Dry-Mesic Forest (Section 3.3.7.6, Page 3-698)
- Southern Hardwood Swamp (Section 3.3.7.7, Page 3-707)
- Southern Mesic Forest (Section 3.3.7.8, Page 3-714)
- Southern Tamarack Swamp (Section 3.3.7.9, Page 3-721)
- White Pine - Red Maple Swamp (Section 3.3.7.10, Page 3-726)

Summary of Vertebrate Species of Greatest Conservation Need Associated with Southern Forest Communities

29 Birds
14 Herptiles
11 Mammals

54 Total Species

The vertebrate Species of Greatest Conservation Need in each of these ten southern forest communities are presented in the following sections, along with information on opportunities, threats, and priority conservation actions.